

A CHANGING COMMUNITY



The Belgian community in Northeastern Wisconsin, including St. Mary of the Snows Catholic Church along Wisconsin 57 in Namur, is celebrating its 150th anniversary this year.

TOP: Harry Chaudoir Jr., left, and his father, Harry Sr., visit the Belgian historic district in Namur last week. Harry Sr. will celebrate his 100th birthday Aug. 14. Photos by Selena Jabara/Press-Gazette

Belgian numbers shrink as development increases

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NAMUR — Harry Chaudoir Sr. still speaks Walloon, lives on a dairy farm and eats lunch precisely at 11 o'clock every morning.

"They have school buses now, but I used to walk 3 miles each way from home to classes," he recalled recently.

At 99 years old, Chaudoir is probably the oldest Belgian-American in Northeastern Wisconsin. His community, the largest settlement of Walloon-speaking Belgians in the United States, will celebrate his 100th birthday and its own 150th anniversary this year.

Belgians arrived in 1853 and grew to more than 20,000 in the region. Their descendants still number about 10,000, but the decline of agriculture and rising property values, among other factors, continue to disperse the population. Even among those remaining,



This Belgian schoolhouse in Namur is run by the Norbertine order.

the Belgian identity is waning. Few but the oldest members can speak Walloon.

William Laatsch, professor of geography at University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, has studied the community and recent trends.

"I refer to these as the twilight years of the Belgian community here. That makes this anniversary all the more significant," Laatsch said.

The focus of the community's heritage is tiny Namur on Wisconsin 57,

where St. Mary of the Snows Catholic Church dates to approximately 1915. The church and nearby school are run by the Norbertine Order, which was founded there.

Among those retaining their Belgian heritage is Harry Chaudoir's son, Harry Jr., the president of the local Belgian-American Club. At 76, he is ready

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Community/Walloon not spoken as much as before

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to relinquish his post as president this summer after more than 30 years.

The two Chaudoirs spoke about the community at the family farm this week. The elder Chaudoir's hearing impairment, dating back to working in Sturgeon Bay shipyards, required frequent translation help from his son.

Both men grew up speaking Walloon and only learned English when they started school. Harry Sr. was born near Chaudoir's Dock on the bay of Green Bay in 1903. "When we started this club in 1972, most of the members were speaking Walloon," Harry Jr. said. "Now there are only a few left."

The club formed close ties with Walloon residents of Belgium. Every other year, the Americans fly to Belgium or the Belgians fly here. Harry Jr. said it's a treat to speak Walloon in Europe, but even there the language is losing out to Flemish and French.

According to Laatsch, Belgian men often still find work in farming, construction or the shipyards, trades long dominated by people with Belgian last names.

But women, he said, are moving away more often after attending college and marrying

► Learn about activities to mark the 150th anniversary at www.greenbaypressgazette.com.

outside the Belgian community.

Chaudoir and many others see change only accelerating in the coming years. Widening of Wisconsin 57 is expected to bring more development and people north from Green Bay.

Mary Ann Defnet, vice president of the club and co-chair of the 150th anniversary committee, said there's reason to believe the community will survive.

"People are still loyal to their families and their homes. There's that glue that sticks here still. The Belgians historically had to work so hard to make a living, so I think they became attached to the land and to these lifestyles."

Priest, cheap land drew Belgians to Northeast Wisconsin

They were originally headed for Kaukauna, but a band of 10 Belgian families chose the Door Peninsula in 1853 because they met a Belgian priest from the Bay Settlement area during a child's funeral in Green Bay.

For 150 years, Belgians have called southern Door, Kewaunee and eastern Brown counties their home. They still represent the largest settlement in the United States of "Walloon" Belgians, which refers to an ancient Latin-root language. Other larger concentrations of Flemish-speaking Belgians exist around Detroit, Chicago and Davenport, Iowa.

The Walloons paid the government \$1.25 per acre for land and started working tim-

ber and fishing. Later they became expert dairy farmers.

In 1854-55, thousands more Belgians followed, founding towns that still exist today such as Brussels, Union and Rosiere.

The settlement suffered many setbacks, including a disastrous wildfire in 1871 that killed dozens and wiped out entire towns.

Today, historians estimate the local population of Walloon Belgian descendants to be declining but still numbering about 10,000.

Source: Xavier Martin's account of "The Belgians in Northeast Wisconsin," Wisconsin Historical Collections, XIII